Citizen Interaction in E-Government Initiatives:
Are we there yet?

While I don't typically look to talk TV as a means of addressing significant issues facing our country, last night was an exception. Upon tuning into an evening interview program aired by a major network, I listened as an astute caller from Los Angeles addressed the very issue that I have been grappling with for the past several years:

> *"And I wondered does (your guest) have any suggestions for an American such as myself, for a way to voice my outrage? Because I'm so frustrated. I feel like writing the White House (because) writing my Congressman won't do any good…"*

The suggestion offered by the guest? "I think that you should continue to write your Congresspeople..."

Our great nation, built upon the democratic principles of citizen inclusion, can do better than that.

How much longer can we expect citizens to believe that their voice – when used in this way – really makes a difference? For a democratic society to be effective, citizen input must be valued. And as the caller expressed, citizens are becoming increasingly frustrated (and aware) that their voice is not being heard.

The reason for the deafness is simple: public comment is invited through mail, fax, email or through simple Web submission forms. Either way, public comment is collected in a completely unstructured manner. Massive public comment, combined with an inefficient means to collect and manage such comment, results in a chaotic jumble of unformed data on a truly insurmountable scale.

Some of the greatest advancements in our global economy have resulted from technology, and these technological advances have transformed the way we work and live. Why, then, has government not seized the opportunity to transform as well, with the help of proper technology?

In 2004, 97M Americans used the Internet to contact the government last year, according to the Pew Internet & America Life Project. Some 38M Americans contacted the government by email specifically to try to change a policy or affect a politician's vote on a law. The public's demand for involvement in government via the Internet is enormous – and rapidly growing.

Some may argue that existing e-Government initiatives are adequate. While I believe these efforts have made great strides in providing citizens with transaction-based services, they fall short of enabling governments to truly interact with constituents.

During my recent travels to Washington D.C., I had the opportunity to discuss this very issue with many government representatives, and the conversations confirmed my belief: Many within government are still trying to figure out what e-Government is.

One thing it most definitely is not is e-mail communication. We have all heard the multitude of stories recapping the use of e-mail or Web forms to increase interaction with citizens. The unhappy endings have resulted in compromised internal networks through the transmission of viruses and other security threats, massive yet meaningless communication – compounded by special interest groups, and the subsequent fear and reluctance to further engage the public.

Emerging Public Communications Management solutions, however, ease the burdens associated with public involvement, and make it easy for both citizens to participate and governments to manage. These easy-to-use solutions enable agencies to produce pointed, specific questions for each proposed rule change, legislation, project, issue or event. Public comment is captured electronically in a meaningful, organized and analytic way.
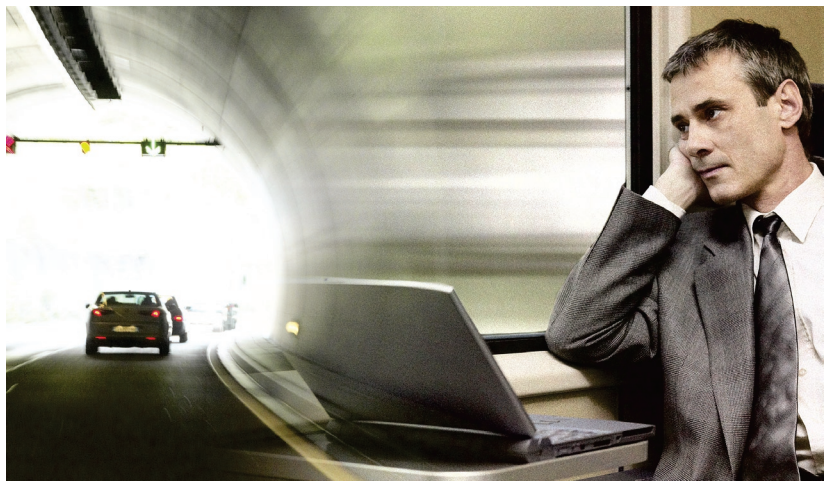
These solutions allow governments to hear the voice of the people with an unparalleled clarity—without the burden of trying to process unmanageable data.

While today's technology is the answer, not all technology is created equally. Public comment initiatives can only be successful (both for legal and practical reasons) if the solution fully integrates the four key components discussed below:

1 Attribution – E-mail is frequently compromised because it is so easily hijacked by mass e-mail campaigns, or so-called "smart mobs." An unidentified individual, perhaps an individual outside of the constituency, can launch a massive e-mail attack with a simple click of a button.

2 Moderation – Constructive, meaningful public comment must remain pertinent, otherwise it is of limited use to governments. E-mail and Web forms invite off-topic comments simply because of their open-endedness.

3 Structure – Correspondence, e-mail and Web forms, such as those used at the federal government's eRulemaking site (www.regulations.gov), are completely unstructured and require significant staff time to sift through the mess. According to projections from Gartner, white-collar workers will spend anywhere from 30 to 40 percent of their time this year managing documents—imagine the cost to an agency dealing strictly with unstructured comment.

4 Analytical Tools – Without the ability to analyze data, even structured comment can be difficult to interpret. Web-based solutions enable officials to seamlessly collect the data, and immediately analyze and report the results; greatly enhancing the decision-making process.

Effective Public Communications strategies, combined with Web-based solutions, can help agencies eliminate the snare of bureaucracy, and turn public comment into legislative progress—all within the seamless inclusiveness of a Web browser.

The Web offers a unique opportunity for a revolution in representative government by allowing the public to be heard, while enabling the government to serve.

About the Author:

Kim Patrick Kobza is President and CEO of Neighborhood America, the leading provider of Web-based solutions for managing public communications. After years as a practicing land use attorney, Mr. Kobza co-founded Neighborhood America in 1999 upon recognizing the need for more constructive citizen participation in government processes. Mr. Kobza has a strong multi-disciplinary background with over 20 years of experience in business, law, technology, and community leadership. He is a frequent author and lecturer on industry advances, public communications management and leadership issues.